Minnesota's First Farmers

Much of what we know about early farming in Minnesota we have learned through Native American history. Long before European settlers arrived and long before statehood, the Ojibwe (sometimes called Anishinabe) and the Dakota American Indians were farming.

Early Ojibwe peoples lived in the northern lakes and forest regions of what would later become Minnesota. They hunted and fished, and harvested wild berries, fruits and wild rice. They tapped maple trees for tasty treats. Ojibwe people often had small gardens near their homes.

Fort Snelling was the first farming community by European settlers in the area. (1820s) Native farming had begun hundreds of years earlier. *Original drawing by Peter Rindisbacher, Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society*

The Dakota lived in the southern and southwestern plains of what is now Minnesota. Their villages dotted the banks of the Mississippi, Minnesota, St. Croix and Cannon Rivers. Dakota men hunted for food. Dakota women were active farmers, raising corn, squash and beans in fields near the villages. Dakota people also gathered many different wild foods.

By the early 1820s, Fort Snelling had been built on a hill where the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers meet. The troops needed plenty of food, and Colonial Josiah Snelling ordered that 200 acres of land beside the Minnesota River be tilled for crops. In 1823, the harvest brought wheat, oats, corn and many kinds of vegetables.

Changing Faces of Minnesota Agriculture

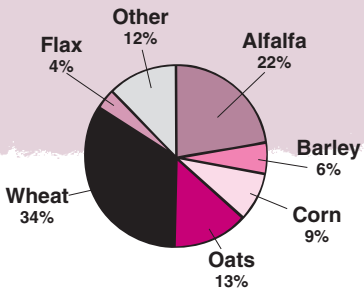
Soon after Fort Snelling was established, immigrants from Europe began arriving in the area. Fleeing near-starving conditions in their native lands, they settled on small plots of land hoping to grow enough food for themselves, their own families and their farm animals. They were **diversified** farmers, meaning they planted different crops. Most planted oats, potatoes, corn and beans. They often had a few animals for milk and meat.

By 1860, big changes were happening. The Homestead Act of 1862 made it possible for settlers to claim 160-acre plots of land. With machines such as reapers and threshers, farmers could farm more land. They began to **specialize** in one crop, or one main crop. Wheat was king as business people from the East bought huge tracts of land (10,000 acres or more) and planted it mostly in wheat. Shipped to flour mills in Minneapolis, all this wheat made Minneapolis the Flour Capital of the World.

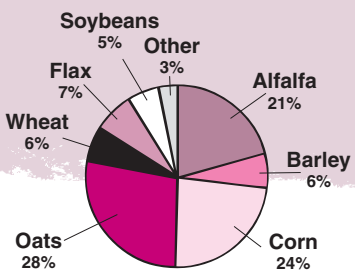
In 1900 wheat and oats made up nearly half of Minnesota's cropland. But the scene was about to change, Crop disease, along with less demand for these grains, discouraged farmers from planting oats and wheat, New technology, especially in corn and soybeans, brought hearty hybrid plants that could withstand cooler temperatures and could be ready for harvest in less time. This meant corn, soybeans and other crops could be grown further north in the state. At the same time, new uses for crops are always being developed, creating more demand.

Today many farmers specialize in growing one or more of the main crops shown on the 2000 graph. How do the terrain, soil and weather conditions influence what they grow?

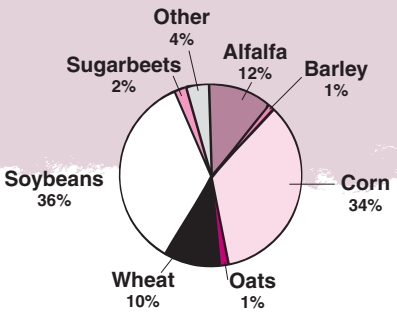
1900 Minnesota Crop Area
Percent of 17 Million Acres



1950 Minnesota Crop Area
Percent of 18.5 Million Acres



2000 Minnesota Crop Area
Percent of 19.5 Million Acres



Graphs Courtesy Dr. Vern Cardwell, U of M Agronomy

Farm Animals - Then and Now

Long ago, people were hunters and gatherers. They roamed from place to place to find the plants and animals they needed to survive.

Over time, humans learned to grow crops and to tame animals. Historians say animals were domesticated between 7,000 and 10,000 years ago starting in the Middle East and Asia. Sheep, goats, pigs and dogs were domesticated first, followed by cattle. Animals helped humans with work and transportation. They provided meat, milk, hide for clothing and shelter and more. Animals helped make it possible for people to live in permanent settlements.

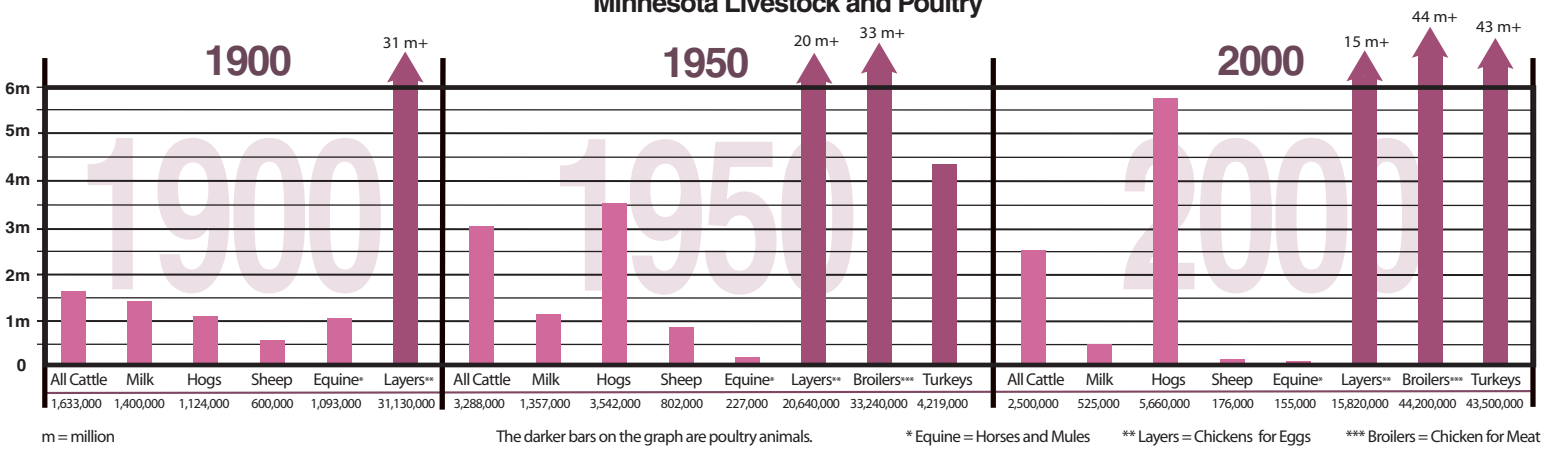
Except for turkeys*, all major forms of livestock on our farms today were brought to America by early explorers and settlers from Europe.

The first cattle to graze Minnesota's grasslands belonged to solders at Fort Snelling, which was established in 1820. Over the next few decades, thousands of settlers moved into the area. Minnesota became a state with many towns and settlements.

Most early settlers had kept only a few animals to meet the needs of their own families. Now with more people, the demand for meat, milk and other animal products grew. Minnesota's soils, climate and terrain were good for raising farm animals and animal feed. Some farmers began to specialize in raising livestock.

The graphs below give a glimpse of Minnesota livestock and poultry animals in 1900, 1950 and 2000.

Minnesota Livestock and Poultry



m = million

The darker bars on the graph are poultry animals.

* Equine = Horses and Mules

** Layers = Chickens for Eggs

*** Broilers = Chicken for Meat

1. Which animal had the highest numbers in 1900? In 1950? In 2000?

2. Which animals appeared for the first time in 1950?

3. Why did the numbers of equine (horses and mules) drop so much from 1900 to 2000? How did the use of these animals change over that time?

4. How did the number of turkeys change over the three periods? Are our farm turkeys today the same type of bird as those hunted by the Indians and Pilgrims?

5. What category of meat (beef, pork, poultry) seems to be growing the most quickly? Why do you think this is so?

** Wild turkeys are native to America.*

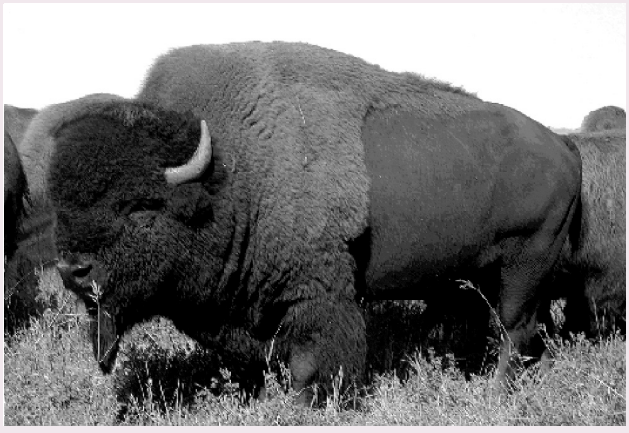
The Bison is Back

The bison is the largest mammal in North America. Although 200 million bison once roamed North America, in recent times they were considered an endangered species. Today more than 300,000 bison live on private and public land in the United States.

Minnesota has the second largest number of bison producers in the nation with over 12,000 bison. Minnesota's top bison counties are Otter Tail and Winona. Bison are becoming a popular choice of meat because they are low in fat.

Did you know:

Bison were called buffalo many years ago. The name is so closely connected to America's history and heritage that many still call them buffalo today. Often the animal is called bison and the meat it provides is called buffalo.



This bison is five years old and weighs 2,400 pounds!

Photo Courtesy Minnesota Buffalo Association

Changing Faces of the Land

As soon as the glaciers melted, people arrived in what later became Minnesota. Early people were very aware of land, water and wildlife. They lived in tune with the natural world and its seasons. They believed the land belonged to everyone. In these times, human actions changed the land very little.

The 1800s saw thousands of settlers from Europe flooding into the area. Most came to farm, but some came to start other businesses. By the middle of the century, much of the land had been surveyed and divided into sections or plots. Now individuals, the government or companies could *own* the land. Landowners could decide how they wanted to use their own property.

New inventions were appearing everywhere. By the end of the 1800s, steam power, railroads, steel plows, repeating rifles, new flour milling technologies and many other tools had brought rapid changes to the way people used the land and its resources.

Agriculture and Urban Areas Change the Land

Our growing population meant more food, clothing, fuel and shelter were needed here in Minnesota. Better ways of transporting products to markets (railroads, roads, ships and barges) meant Minnesota's products could be sold to people far away. It all meant more demand for Minnesota products. Minnesota's huge forests were cut for lumber. Settlers plowed up prairie sod and cleared away forests to make farms and towns.

When areas were too wet to farm, many found ways to drain away extra water. This drainage improved **cropland** for better yields or added more acres of tillable soil.

Minnesota is one of the most highly drained states in the nation. About forty percent of our total croplands have been affected by **drainage**. Ditches, tiled waterways and pipelines all help farmers drain their fields. Draining is important to agriculture in some areas of our state.

As towns and cities grew larger, they pushed out into farm and forest areas. **Wetlands**, often thought to be "useless," were drained to make housing developments, shopping malls, roads and parking lots.

People have needs, but there is a cost to the environment and ecosystems when wetlands are drained, forests are cut down and prairie grasses are plowed under. Forests, prairies and wetlands serve many important purposes just as they stand. Today, farmers and urban folks alike understand much more about protecting Minnesota's natural resources. As we meet human needs, we know we cannot ignore the needs of the natural world. Keeping balance is the only way our world can survive.

Tiling was hard work in the early 1900s. Clay or concrete tile was laid less than 3/8″apart on a slight slope. The opening between tiles allowed for water to slowly move out of the soil and into the tile. The slope sent it off the field and into a drainage ditch. Farmers could then plant crops such as corn, wheat and oats.

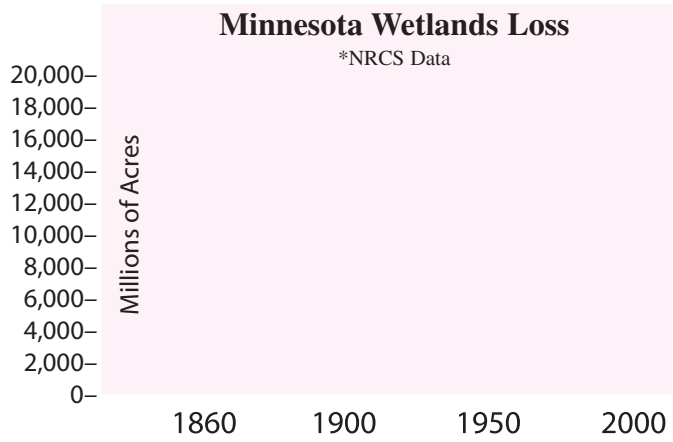
Photo Courtesy Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Wetlands:
Going, going. . . Coming Back?

In the 1860s Minnesota had almost 19 million* acres of wetlands. Then settlers from Europe started coming in large numbers. By 1900 we had lost almost one million acres of wetlands, mostly to create farm fields. By 1950, we had lost another 5 million acres. By 2000, another 3 million acres were gone, totaling over 9 million acres or about 50% of the original acres of wetlands. (How many acres were left?) Most drained wetlands (73%**) were converted to agricultural uses. Urban growth, industry and transportation took the other 27 percent. Use the data to make a graph in the space below. What questions do you have after making your graph? What trend do you see?

* Figures rounded off to nearest whole number.

** Wetlands have many descriptions from permanent lakes to seasonally wet areas. Most of the 73% was seasonally wet land (too wet to plow).



What's happening across the U.S.? You know that wetlands are the earth's sponges, storing excess water and slowly releasing it. That's how they help protect against flooding. Wetlands are important habitat for wildlife and birds. They are water purification systems. They are beautiful to look at. Look at the wetlands data for the United States. What trend do you see? How might you explain this trend?

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We are starting to protect remaining wetlands, but can we bring some of them back? Stay tuned for events in your own community, in your own future.

Imagine you have to help decide.
If you are called upon to vote to drain a wetland for another shopping mall or preserve it as a wildlife refuge, how will you decide?